

# Pam Houston's "A Blizzard Under Blue Sky": Postmodern Individualism and the American Woman

By  
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*The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.*

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Changes in a nation's culture are a natural phenomenon that one can expect when ideas and opinions are shared among varied individuals. However, as Friedrich Nietzsche warned, there can be a danger in allowing a national character or identity to supplant that of the individual. The tremendous influences and opportunities afforded a multi-cultural nation like America cannot be overlooked. The great social-cultural observer Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1845 of the importance cultural pluralism would have on the American psyche. The equality of opportunity that was first afforded white land-owners, and later extended to women and minority populations, shows the changes that have occurred over the past 237 years in what has been called "The Great Experiment" of American democracy. Mattern (2009) believes that these incremental and inevitable changes that occur in the cultural milieu should also be applied to the development of the short story in its need to "expand and innovate" (p. 1). In the narrative "A Blizzard Under Blue Sky" (1992), the protagonist's personal struggle and ultimate confrontation of her clinical depression by going winter camping alone in the mountains of Utah is juxtaposed with a steadfast individualistic determination to survive. Pam Houston unveils a clear example of the postmodern

American woman and the ethos of self-reliance.

Set within a longer novel, *Cowboys are My Weakness* (1992), Houston's "A Blizzard Under Blue Sky" recounts a protagonist's personal and dangerous search for self-healing by venturing on a weekend winter camping trip alone in the Rocky Mountains. The first-person narrative begins with an admission by the protagonist - perhaps Houston, or, because of the lack of gender-specific pronouns, a representative of everyone - of being diagnosed with clinical depression. The narrator believes that "...city dwellers escape to Park City, where the snow is fresh and the sun is shining and everybody is happy, except me" (p.185). The physician, who, interestingly, is one of the few characters in the story given a gender-specific pronoun, suggests the narrator take drugs as a method of managing the depression. "She said, 'The machine that drives you is broken. You need something to help you get it fixed'" (p.185). Events in the narrator's life are becoming too overwhelming, but Houston's protagonist refuses to take medication as a way to deal with her pain and confusion and, instead, decides to go winter camping.

The narrator's refusal to take medications prescribed by the doctor seems a direct criticism of the modern American medical and pharmaceutical industry, and illustrates the deep American value of self-reliance. According to a recent Time magazine article, Americans spend 2.8 trillion dollars, or twenty percent of the current G.D.P. (Gross Domestic Product) on health care (p.20). This has caused a surge in alternative care and also made it difficult for many Americans to afford health insurance. The protagonist in Houston's story seems to reach the conclusion that a lifetime of clinical depression 'maintenance' with medication would be akin to losing a sense of self, and therefore, takes the risk of winter camping to challenge the medical establishment and the 'sensible choice'. Even in the 1830's, Tocqueville observed:

They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands (p.121)

Much of this national character can be traced back to the lack of resources available to the American settler. It is also an important distinction between the 'established aristocracies' of Nineteenth Century Europe from which many of the first American settlers came. Datesman, Crandall, and Kearny (2005) have written that because the titles of nobility were forbidden in the American Constitution, Americans were released from the idea that "their place in life was determined largely by the social class into which they were born" (p.31). Of course, at that time, most of the observations by Tocqueville pertained to men, but Houston shows that this American value of self-reliance belongs to women, as well. The protagonist in *Blizzard* offers a clearer answer to a housemate's misgivings by sharing the rationale behind winter camping: "When everything in your life is uncertain, there's nothing quite like the clarity and precision of fresh snow and blue sky" (p.185). This comment is also directed towards the housemate's advice when the wisdom of winter camping alone is discussed. All the housemate can do is offer the narrator recommendations on equipment and food safety for a harsh environment because it seems the choice to go is already made. The protagonist leaves no doubt in the mind of the housemate, and the reader, that the decision to go camping is one of life and death.

The narrator's love for nature and letting go of everything familiar seems to be partially motivated by the diagnosis of clinical depression and by Houston's own love of the outdoors. By the protagonist's own acknowledgement, winter camping was an unknown activity. Furthermore, the planned weekend for this challenge coincided with a storm that was "...thirty-two degrees below zero in town on the night I spent in my snow cave" (p.185). Some reviewers have suggested that Houston's protagonist was actually choosing to commit suicide rather than continue a life with clinical depression based on her lack of preparation and experience in such a harsh environment. However, it is perhaps more logical that Houston's own sense of adventure and self-reliance would lend themselves to the idea of an important psycho-physical experience to heal a medical condition outside of the established medical structure. Betsy Kline (1999) has labeled much of Houston's work "tough-girl fiction", and that classification can be understood more clearly when Houston's own life is clarified.

Born in 1962, Pam Houston grew up in suburban Pennsylvania but lives in Colorado and teaches in California. Because of her unique outsider's view of the West, Houston is able to give a voice to that spirit of American independence and self-reliance that many of her characters possess that otherwise might not be available to someone originally born there. By her own admission, Houston has embraced all the natural wonders and activities offered in the western part of North America. She has made a living as a white-water river guide, hiked into the wilderness, and scouted for wild animals for hunters while climbing mountains (Kline, 1999). In an interview with Robert Wilder (2008), Houston remarked:

I write about the West. I think I wrote well about the West. I think I found my voice here. If I were a westerner, if I had been born here, I might not have seen it. And I'm so much a person who came here and let the West blow my mind. Which is because I grew up in suburban Pennsylvania, and that's a big part of the puzzle. Without that step, I might write about the West in a completely different way (p.24).

Still, it is Houston who believes that these 'adventures' are less about defining herself as a person because she has never really felt brave. Houston further states in her interview with Wilder (2008) that she is searching for honesty in her writing, which tries to expound "some kind of essential truth about what it means to be alive" (p.24). In much of Houston's work – including *Blizzard Under Blue Sky* – the protagonist often struggles with self-doubt and insecurities. As described by Smith (1998), many of the heroines in these short vignettes are faced with "... a search for a home and a man with whom to establish it". It seems that these conflicts of strong, determined, ambitious woman, combined with a need for acceptance and love, have made the protagonists of Houston's works more real and natural. Nevertheless, it is the unknown and dangerous adventure in *Blizzard* which the protagonist embarks on that encourages the reader to crave a similar experience.

The narrator in *Blizzard* begins the journey into the snow-covered mountains alone –

except for her two dogs, which take on human characteristics similar to a fable, or, perhaps more accurately, a symbolic rendering of the character's internal struggle. The two dogs, named Jackson and Hailey, are important to the story as a means for the reader to better understand the battle between the optimistic feeling of self-healing and the love of nature the protagonist experiences, with the ever-present weight of clinical depression. It is Jackson who encourages the narrator to "ski harder, go faster, [and] climb higher" , while the other dog, Hailey, is slower, and "turned her belly to the sun and groaned" (p.186). It is the 'conversations' among these three distinct characters during the hike into the winter mountains that allows for a better understanding of the profound difficulty the narrator has in navigating between the depression that has gripped her life and the chance to regain control.

While deep in the Beaver Creek wilderness, the protagonist continues to question her preparedness and ability to survive. These nagging doubts disappear temporarily when the silence of the area is noticed. The loudest noise was the sound of their own walking which became "some primal song" (p.186) . Further on, the narrator and her companions stop to eat lunch near a lake that looked like "a womb-shaped meadow" (p. 186). Again, the idea of self-healing is introduced with the psychological benefits of primal therapy. It is perhaps Houston's intent to introduce the various modern psychological treatments for depression- such as primal therapy- as a contrast to the protagonist's decision to self-heal. One could also view the two dogs as an introduction to the idea of pet therapy as another method of treating depression. The narrator, of course, has modified these 'clinical' treatments and will pursue a means of self-healing – and bring the reader along - to wherever the trail concludes.

Faced with the real danger of a night in sub-zero temperatures, the protagonist is unable to sleep and instead spends the night "chastising myself for thinking I was Wonder Woman" (p.187). This is the not only one of the first indications of the protagonist's gender but also the climax of the story, in which the decision to live or die is made. It is interesting to note that the narrator at this important moment is both worried about her own situation and also berates herself for putting the dogs in harm's

way. The need for self-actualization and self-reliance at this point seems to be usurped by the real danger that the character finds herself in. As the cold, dark night makes way for the bright morning, the narrator begins to realize that death has not defeated her. Instead, there is a celebration of “the rebirth of my fingers and toes, and the survival of many more important parts of my body” (p.188). Houston shows the reader how one might directly face a difficult problem –whether emotional or psychological – by essentially being ‘reborn’ through a psycho-physical challenge.

Essentially, “A Blizzard Under Blue Sky” is a celebration of triumph awarded to those who ‘take charge’ of their own lives in a therapeutic experience that places at the center, the individual. Houston shows the reader an existence that might be lived without depression that is by no means ‘cured’ . After the experience in the woods, the protagonist is offered “a glimpse outside of the house of mirrors” (p.188). Even though Houston often makes use of gender-neutral pronouns and character names, the protagonist in this story seems to represent a woman in search of self. Within the greater work of the book *Cowboys are my Weakness*, Houston allows the character in *Blizzard* to break free of the cultural trappings of human relationships and modern medicine, and find her own strength as an independent woman in the American West.

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